New York Animation: A Tour of Bray Studios – Part 2

by Bob Coar

Backtracking to the summer of 1918: U.S. troops fought across Europe while Bray turned out military training films. Corporate contracts for industrial films proved to be another source of income. For five years *COLONEL HEEZA LIAR* cartoons had been the mainstay, first under Pathe, then distributed by Paramount Pictures. Now, Bray Studios was expanding beyond animation.

Bray had his associate Watson B. Robinson draw up a contract with Jamison Handy's Newspaper Films Corporation in Chicago. Bray wanted to pick up clients in the Midwest. Jamison Handy, well connected in the Chicago/Detroit area, would act as a sales-representative for Bray Studios.

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ROBERT BURNS
GEORGE J. JOHNSTONE

August 30th, 1918.

Mr. John R. Bray,
President, The Bray Studios, Inc.,
23 East 26th Street,
New York City.

Dear Doc:

I omitted to enclose with the revised draft forwarded you yesterday the draft of contract submitted by Mr. Handy together with his additional notes and also your notes, which are now enclosed.

On looking over the revise of the contract and realizing that the industrial film is not separate from the magazine film, as I had thought when preparing the first draft, would it not now be advisable to combine (a) and (b) of Article Fifteenth, to read somewhat as follows:

> "(a) There shall be deducted from the gross receipts for each said weekly release a sum equal to (1) the distributor's percentage, (2) cost of the positive prints, and (3) the estimated cost of producing the negative of the industrial film, as determined by Bray in the contracts for such film, together with any other payments made by Bray on account thereof, and the balance remaining received by Bray from each said weekly release is to be divided equally between Bray and the Corporation, except that Bray's share of such balance shall in no event be less than thirty-five hundred dollars ($3500)."

Yours very truly,

Watson B. Robinson

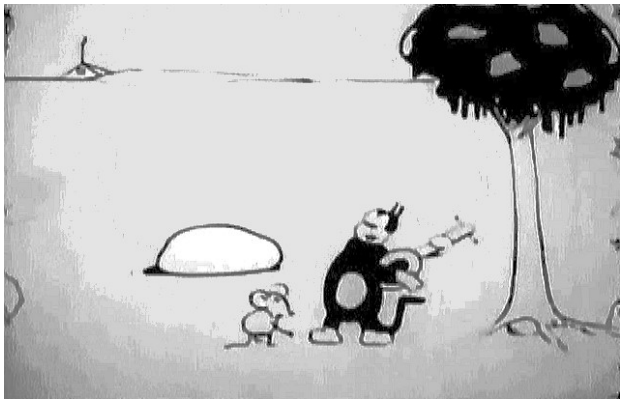
WBR/B
Encls.

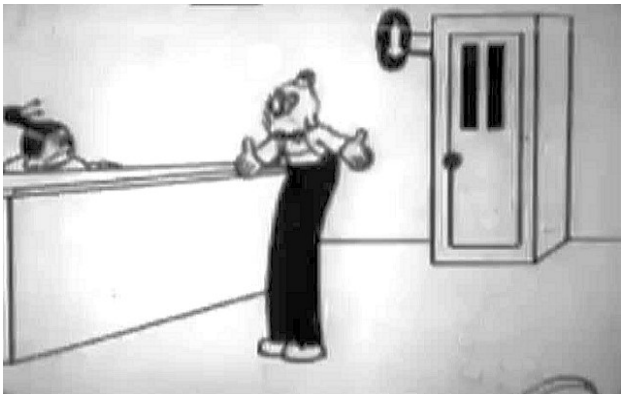
Robinson refers to Bray as "Doc" in that correspondence, indicating a deep friendship between the two. While the firm of

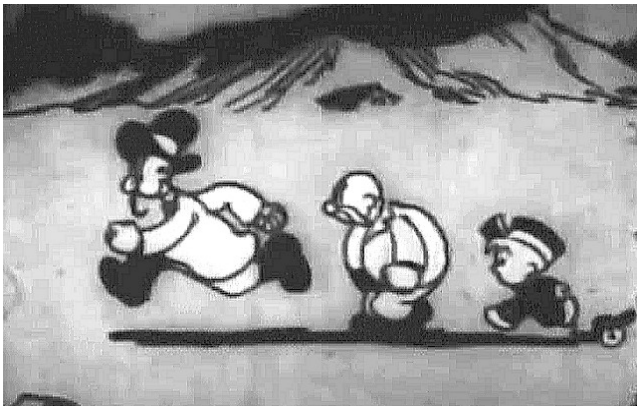
Freuesff & Robinson tended to Bray Studios' corporate structure, patent attorney Clair W. Fairbank litigated the growing number of Bray-Hurd Trust lawsuits.

Using his connection to Paramount Pictures, Bray pushed his territory farther west. Hollywood or bust! Big time movie producer Sam Goldwyn formed a partnership with Bray, increasing **the studio's capitalization from ten thousand dollars to a million-and-a-half dollars. Jacob Leventhal was a vice president in the new corporation, and also on the board of directors along with Max Fleischer and Watson B. Robinson.**

Newspaper baron William Hearst had suspended his International Film Service cartoons during the war. Now, Hearst paid Bray to take them over. **A lot of Hearst's old animators were called back, including Bill Nolan, Frank Moser and Grim Natwick. The IFS team did *HAPPY HOOLIGAN*, *KRAZY KAT;* and *JERRY ON THE JOB*.**







Grim Natwick directed the *JUDGE RUMMY* series. Milt Gross contributed his writing/directing talents to several IFS toons produced by Bray. Mixed Into this creative whirlpool was young artist Walter Lantz. At age nineteen Lantz was already a veteran of IFS and Charles Bowers' *MUTT AND JEFF* crew. A young David Hand returned east from Chicago to get a job working on Fleischer's *OUT OF THE INKWELL* films with Bray Studios.

The Bray-Goldwyn Studio launched with some thrust. During 1920 an attempt at a color cartoon was among the eighty-five animated shorts they released. Then it began to crumble. Part of the problem was Margaret Bray's tightfisted management. Artists didn't get all the supplies they needed and were told to make do. At the same time, Margaret invested in the couple's fancy new Norwich, Connecticut house, set in an elite neighborhood.

They dubbed this 'manor-house' Braybourne. Of course Social appearances needed to be maintained. There must have been talk,

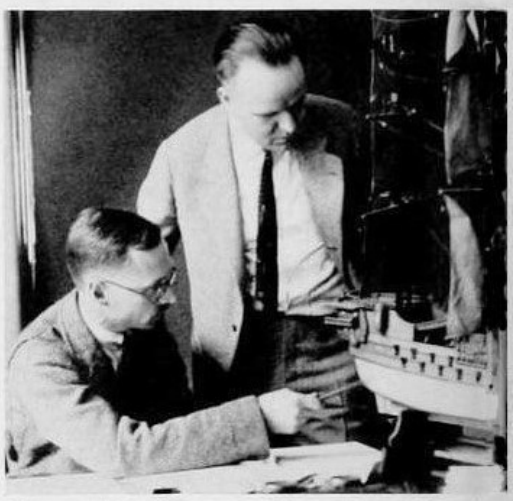
gossip, about the boy Paul, tucked away out of sight in military school. Paul came over from Germany bearing Margaret's maiden name, fueling speculation he was born to her out of wedlock. This turned out to be the case.

Sam Goldwyn's over-bearing management style disrupted the works. Max Fleischer and Jacob Leventhal left in 1921 to open their own studio. Bessie Mae Kelley seems to have designed some character for Paul Terry, and animated a couple shorts for a Chicago-based distributor. Only eighteen cartoons came out of Bray Studios that year.

Difficulties ensued with the Newspaper Films Corporation. Jamison Handy ignored most of Bray's instructions. Handy went rogue on several issues, didn't bring in any clients, wasted capital on projects Bray found unnecessary, and held up matters with constant bickering over stock options. Bray fired Handy. John and Margaret began marketing prints of their cartoons and educational films through Bray Screen Products, Incorporated from an office at 120 West 42nd Street, with a sales catalogue listing the movies available, mostly cartoons. This endeavor functioned as Brayco, a whole other entity from Bray-Goldwyn, which was in trouble. Morale was low. The Brays split from Goldwyn, and regrouped.

During 1922 Bray Productions bought out the Realart Exchange, using that space at 130 West 46th Street for offices and an educational films exchange. Seventeen year old Bill Sturm came over from New Jersey to join the animation department. Sturm had started out part-time with Pat Sullivan Productions while still in high school. Now he divided his time between Bray and attending the Art Students League on West 57th Street.

Bray discontinued the IFS deal with Hearst and most of those animators moved on. Wallace Carlson departed, returning to his old gig in Chicago. Frank Goldman oversaw Bray's educational series *TECHNICAL ROMANCES*. Then Goldman was gone to start his own studio in 1923. Bray found himself reliant on John Norling, who'd trained under Fleischer and Leventhal. 1n 1923 John Norling started a studio right there in the Neptune Building. His partner Arthur Loucks had been an assistant advertising manager at Burroughs Adding Machine Company, one of Bray's clients. Loucks & Norling were often subcontracted by Bray Studios.



Above: Mr. Bray *(seated) confers with an sociate, Jack Norling. At left: scene from early film on radio waves produced for RCA.*

George "Vernon" Stallings, veteran of the Barré Studio, was promoted to supervisor of animation. George Stallings used the name "Vernon" to avoid confusion with his famous baseball manager father. The elder George Stallings was called 'the Miracle Man' due to his leading the last place Boston Braves to a 1914 World Series victory. Walter Lantz and David Hand worked under Stallings' supervision. COLONEL HEEZA LIAR got a makeover, taking a page from OUT OF THE INKWELL, mixing a live-action George Stalling with the cartoon Colonel. These were cheaper to make than fully animated cartoons, and pretty weird to-boot.

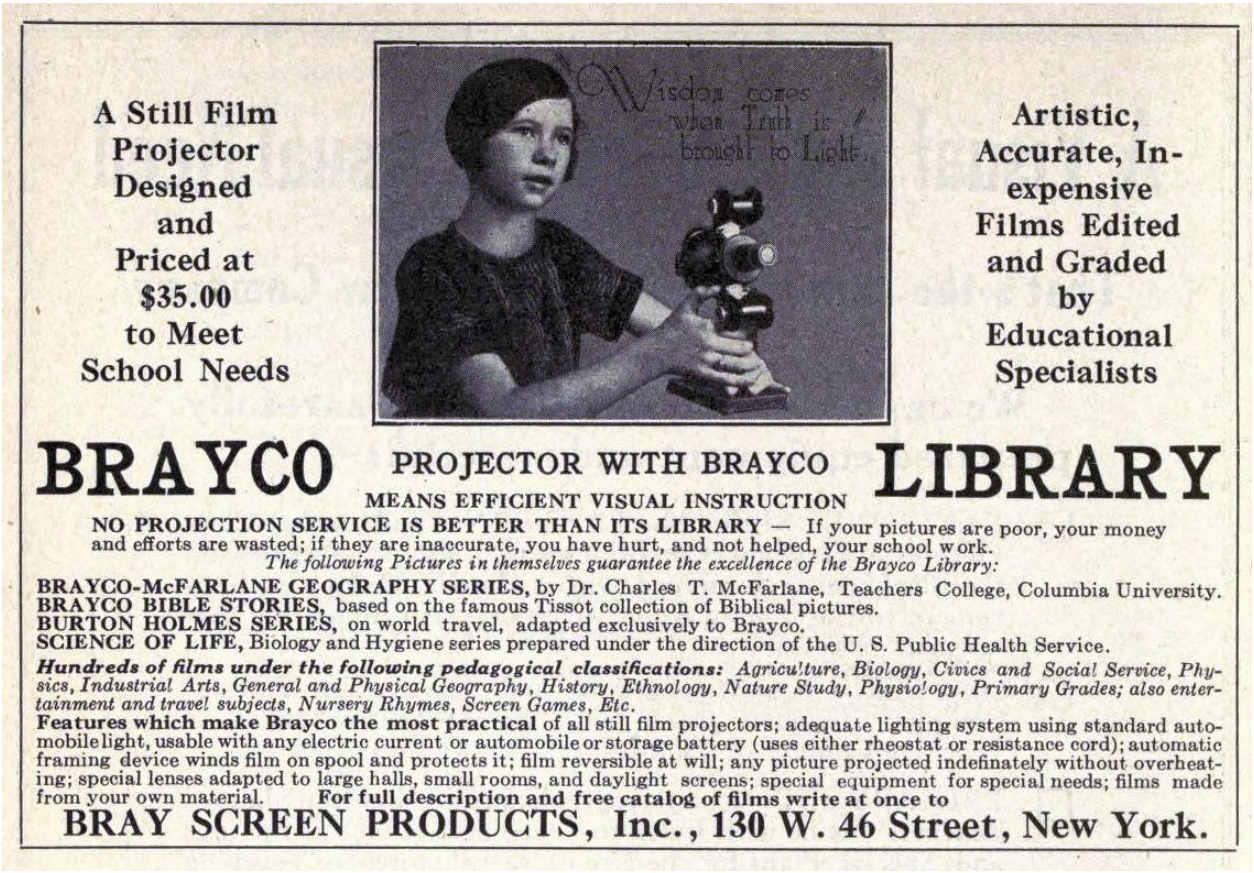
Famous Players-Lasky's animation department seems to have gone bust. Earl Hurd reopened Earl Hurd Cartoons in Kew Gardens. Hurd's son Earl Junior was cameraman and studio manager. *BOBBY BUMPS* were released through Educational Film Exchange.

***COLONEL HEEZA LIAR* had run its course by 1924. George Stallings left because of health issues, so Walter Lantz took over supervising Bray's cartoons. Lantz knew his job depended on devising a hit character. He created *DINKY DOODLE*.**

Lantz appeared in each film, interacting with the animated boy Dinky Doodle. Sometimes bits of stop-motion were used, anything for a laugh. That type of combo-film could be marketed as either a cartoon or a comedy short.

John and Margaret spent more and more time in Hollywood on business trips. They met with Joseph Kennedy, a Boston-based politician who jumped on the motion picture bandwagon early as a producer and distributor. Bray signed a deal for Kennedy's Film Booking Office of America to distribute his cartoons.

In 1924 Bray Screen Products opened at the 46th Street locale so Brayco could market a projector that showed film strips. Not moving pictures, but strips with pictures. Simple and affordable.



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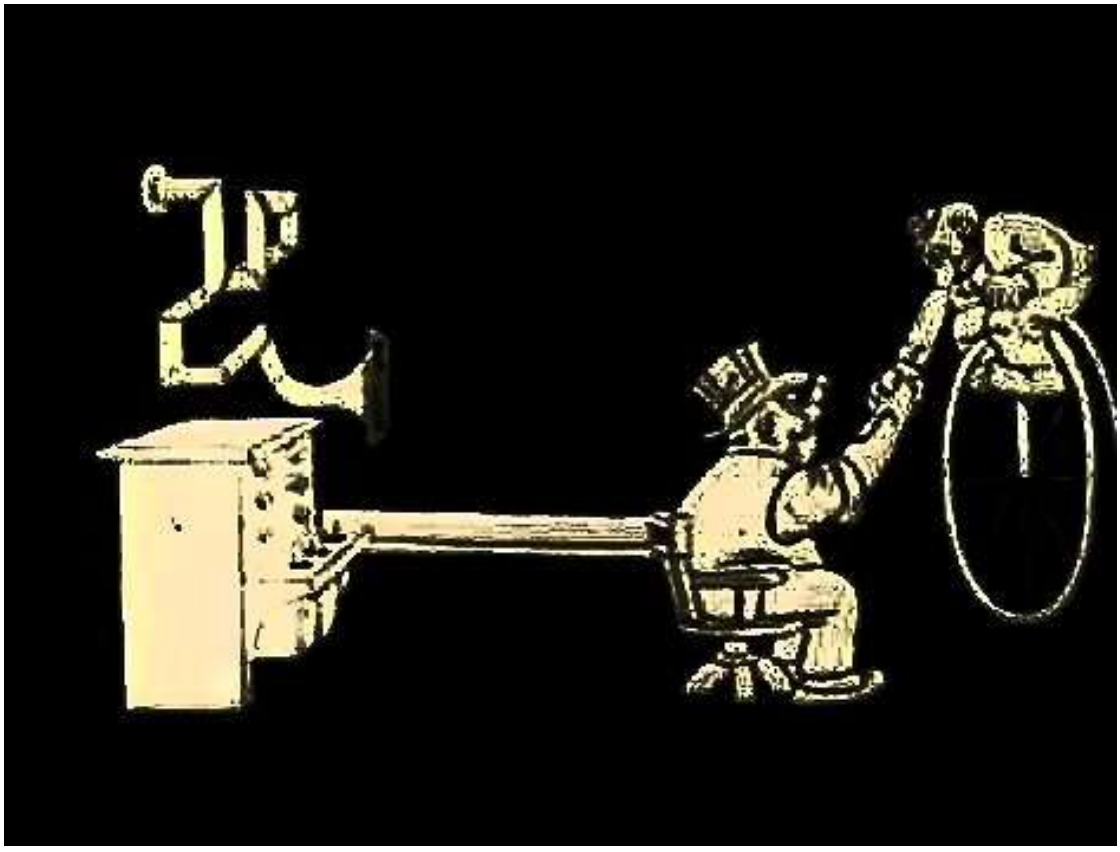
BRAY SCREEN PRODUCTS, Inc., 130 W. 46 Street, New York.

The Bray enterprise now spread out across multiple Manhattan locations. Dealings with Kennedy soured and distribution switched to Standard Cinema. Jaques Kopfstein, highly respected member of the Advertising Engineers Society and

vice president of Chadwick Pictures, was picked to represent Bray Productions in some west coast sales negotiations.

Earl Hurd's studio had Ben Harrison there for thirteen *PEN AND INK VAUDEVILLE* cartoons released by Educational. They were uninspired white forms against a black background meant to kill time between acts at vaudeville shows.



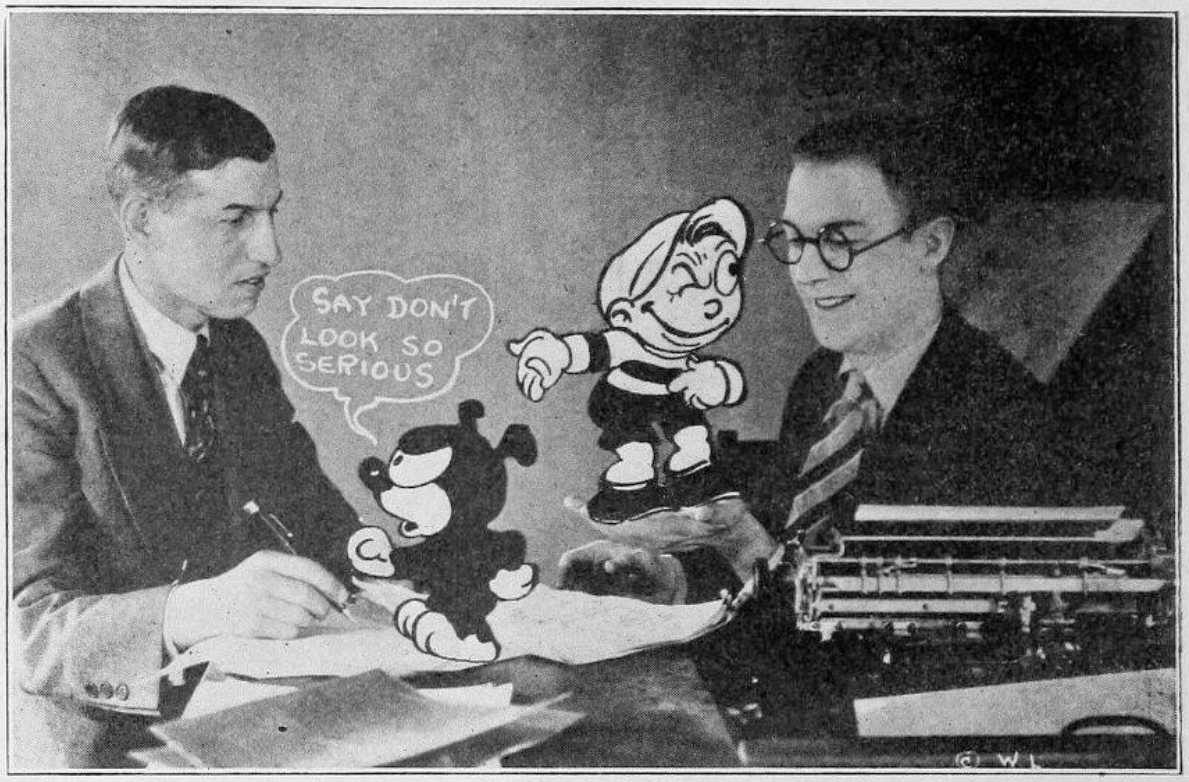
Bray Studios abandoned the Neptune Building in 1925, taking more space at 130 West 46th Street for animation and other departments. Walter Lantz came up with an *UNNATURAL HISTORY* series and *PETE THE PUP*. Lantz appeared on-screen in both. David Hand co-directed some with Lantz, and animated while Lantz looked after other details. Live-action sequences were shot at Tec-Art Studios on West 44th Street.

Bill Sturm had moved on to Max Fleischer's shop. Walter Lantz was twenty-four and running an animation studio. David Hand was about the same age. Italian-born Clyde Geronimi, not much younger, joined them. If Clyde Geronimi wasn't busy assising Lantz on a film, he was concocting some practical-joke to play on a co-worker. Geronimi's favorite target was David Hand because Hand got the most upset. Those high-jinks seemed less disturbing to Chinese-American animator Cy Young who always focused intensely on his drawing.

Walter Lantz's younger brother Michael was then in art school studying sculpture. Mike Lantz had a friend named Jimmie (Shamus) Culhane who could draw. Walter Lantz got the sixteen year old Culhane a starting position at Bray as an office-boy. Jimmie Culhane's main job was to punch holes in pages so they would line up on animators' pegs. Jimmie also ran errands, carefully avoiding the stern glare of Margaret Bray as she made her inspection rounds.

Culhane's natural talent soon led him to inking cels. The kid was fast and accurate. At age six Jimmie had witnessed Winsor McCay on stage performing the *GERTIE* act, and animation seemed to be in his blood. Lantz, who'd been twelve when he saw the *GERTIE* film, understood and took Culhane under his wing. That training paid off when one day a Bray animator got too drunk to draw and Culhane filled in for him. Earl Hurd returned to Bray's animation wing.

***New York DAILY GRAPHIC* sports cartoonist Ving Fuller had joined Lantz's team. John McCrory put in some time with the camera department, as did photographer Ansel Adams. Jacques Kopfstein, now general manager, interacted closely with Lantz. Kopfstein personally wrote promotional articles for DINKY DOODLE and the *UNNATURAL HISTORY* films.**



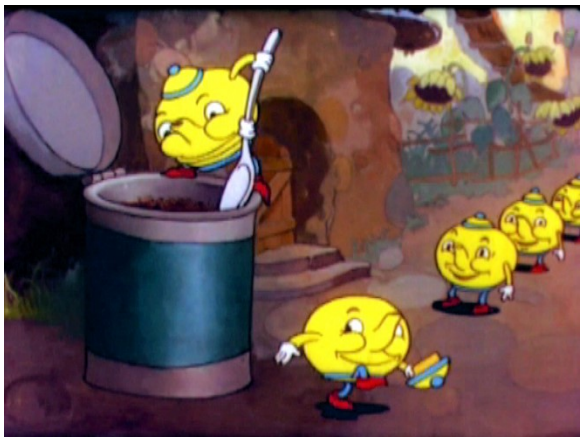
The thirteenth Dinky Doodle cartoon, "Just Spooks", has been completed for release September 15 by F. B. O. Jacques Kopfsten (left), general manager of Bray Productions, is going over preparations for the next with Walter Lantz, director general. "Dinky Doodle and the Babes in the Wood" was the twelfth of the series and it was released on August 12.

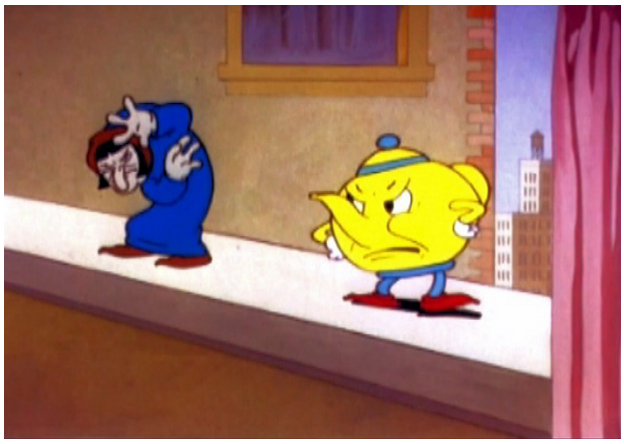
John Bray's interest in cartoons waned. He and Margaret were busy schmoozing in Hollywood. They finally adopted that boy, legitimizing him as Paul A. Bray at age twenty-six. Paul married, moved into the house next door in Norwich, settling into the vice-presidency of Bray Studios.

Jacques Kopfstein started his own company in early 1926. John McCrory had moved on as well, running a little animation studio half a block west of Bray's shop on 46th Street. 1927 turned out to be the end of Bray Studio's days as a serious animation studio when the entertainment division was disbanded. Walter Lantz went on to greater fame with Woody

Woodpecker, while David Hand, Jimmie Culhane, Cy Young, and Clyde Geronimi all became important members of the Disney organization.

When Lipton Tea engaged Bray Studios to make the theatrical cartoon short *TEA POT TOWN* in 1936 Bray farmed production out to Ted Eshbaugh.





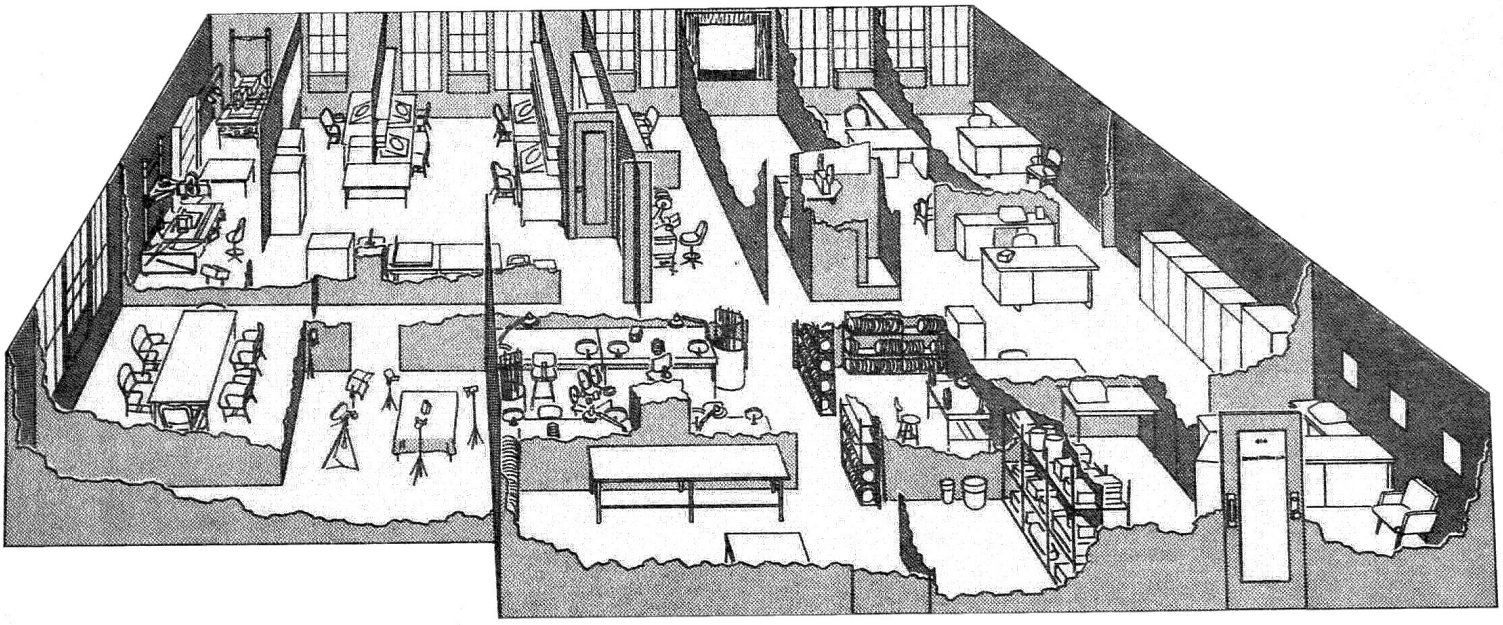
Over time Bray reorganized a smaller animation department to enhance educational and industrial films. By the mid-1940s that department would be run by Elaine Kaduson, a former fashion advertising illustrator for Gimbels Department Store. Kaduson was trained in industrial arts, costume design, illustration, and advanced technical drafting by the New York school system. She worked on military films during the war and was supposedly a free-lance animation artist for Disney Studios.

Sterling Television Company bought broadcast rights to a bunch of Bray cartoons in 1952, including: ten *OUT OF THE INKWELL;* twenty *BOBBY BUMPS;* twelve *DINKY DOODLE;* and eleven *UNNATURAL HISTORY* films. Max Fleischer returned to Bray Studios to revive the animation wing, without much luck. Bray Studios operated out of the Godfrey Building at 729 Seventh Avenue, while John Bray Productions kept offices at 122 West 55th Street.

A mystery surrounds Fleischer's production supervisor William G. Gilmartin. Early on, Fleischer Studios had someone in that job named William A. Gilmartin. Were they relatives? William G's Queens address from 1940 is not reflected in that year's census records. He's just ghosting me.

Anyways, after Max Fleischer and William G. Gilmartin were gone in 1963 Rodell Johnson was director of animation for Bray. Rod Johnson did watercolors at Disney for the first five feature films. The Army commissioned him Captain to supervise animation at the Signal Corps' Astoria facility. Post war, Johnson became director of animation for Shamus Culhane Productions, with a stop at Bill Sturm Studios before going to Bray. Howard Beckerman recalls Rod Johnson commenting on how poorly equipped Bray's animation department was.

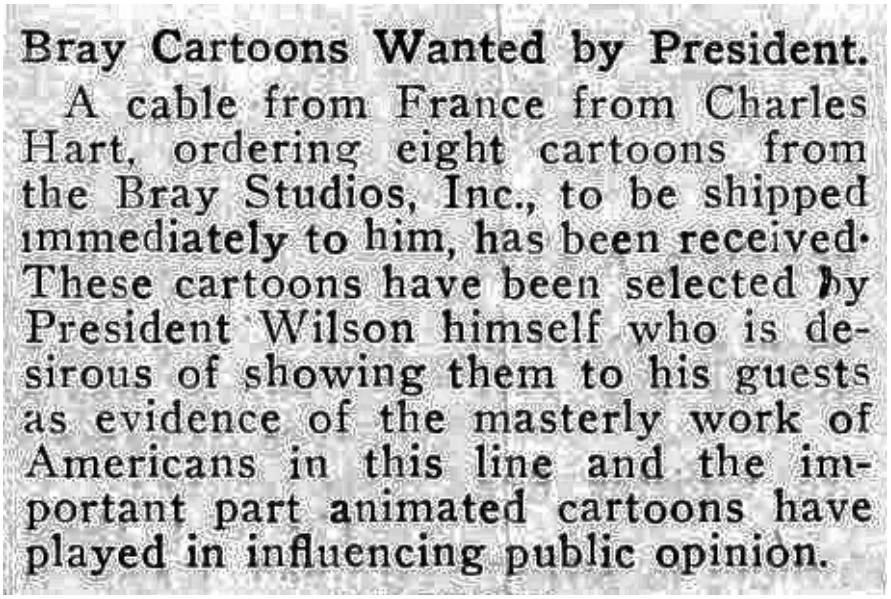
1969 found Bray Studios relocated to the Film Center Building at 630 Ninth Avenue.



John Bray held the title Chairman of the Board. Paul assumed the role of President. His son Paul Jr. was Vice-President. Margaret had been ill for a while and passed away the year before. Paul Jr. was a pilot, and the studio offered aerial photography. Military contracts with the Air Force, Marine Corps, and U.S. Navy continued. Rod Johnson remained Director of Animation, offering both wide-screen and standard productions.

Having lived nearly a full century, John Randolph Bray passed away in 1978, as Bruce Wands replaced Rod Johnson. Bray Studios' art department only had four people by then. Bruce Wands left in 1980 to make a name for himself in the blossoming field of computer animation.

Paul Jr. inherited the presidency of Bray Studios, moving it closer to home at 19 Ketchun Street, near the Saugatuck River in Westport, Connecticut. The last listing I've seen there was for 1999. Paul Jr. was killed in a 2003 plane crash. Bray Studios seems a particularly Twentieth Century enterprise, bursting onto the scene as a powerhouse, only to be surpassed by the industry it helped to forge. Largely forgotten now, Bray Studios' importance might best be reflected in this news article from December 1918 as President Woodrow Wilson convened the Versailles Conference to repair war ravaged Europe:



Bray Cartoons Wanted by President.

A cable from France from Charles Hart, ordering eight cartoons from the Bray Studios, Inc., to be shipped immediately to him, has been received. These cartoons have been selected by President Wilson himself who is desirous of showing them to his guests as evidence of the masterly work of Americans in this line and the important part animated cartoons have played in influencing public opinion.